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"Tis", Meaning Maybe: The Uncertain Last Words of Angela's Ashes

James S. Rogers

1 Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* has been attended by varying degrees of controversy since its publication in 1996[1]. Little debate, however, has centered on the enigmatic precise last word of the book-the single word "Tis" that comprises the entire last chapter-spoken at the time of the narrator's entry into the United States. Given the fixation on leaving Ireland that pervades the book up until this point, it is unsurprising that the ending has been almost universally read as affirming[2]. A reviewer in *Salon*, for instance, summed up the opinion of many when he referred to Frank's emigration as an escape from the "hell" of Limerick, and the arrival in America as "his most triumphant moment[3]". The narrator often speaks of America as a place of deliverance; not long before his departure, while still in Limerick, he writes in desperation that "if I can't get to America I might as well jump into the River Shannon", (*Angela's Ashes* , p. 300). Yet, his first hours in America – despite its construction, in his mind, as an escape from an intolerable captivity – do not seem to be attended by any great sense of relief, nor does our reading of the final page provide what Frank Kermode termed "the sense of an ending[4]". If we look more closely at the exchange that concludes the memoir, there is reason to believe that the book's ending is more open-ended than is generally recognized; in fact, the closing word, "Tis", might more accurately be said to bespeak a deep ambivalence toward the goal of taking up a new life in America that Frank has held before him throughout most of his childhood and adolescence in Ireland.

2 Following the blockbuster success of the memoir, the suddenly famous McCourt gleefully assumed a public persona that was to all purposes that of the media's "default" Irishman, for which his Irish brogue and, yes, blarney, was an inevitable accoutrement. There is a fair amount of blarney in the memoir, too, and McCourt writes of his arrival in the New World in conspicuously Irish cadences. In brief, the book concludes when, after Frank and Tim Boyle (a shipboard acquaintance) have an unexpected sexual encounter with two

women whom they meet on their first night in the New World, Boyle says, "My God, that was a lovely night, Frank[5]". At that point, Chapter 18 ends with Boyle asking, or rather, asserting, "Isn't this a great country altogether?" The reader turns the page to find a single word as Chapter 19: "Tis" (363-364).

3 It is only appropriate that *Angela's Ashes* end with spoken dialogue. At its best, the book's highly oral and anecdotal quality, honed in its origins as a two-hander stage piece, serves to carry along what can be an excruciating tale. Those are also qualities that grate on many readers. One of the more persistent criticisms of *Angela's Ashes* is its sheer volubility: even one of the book's unabashed admirers, Edward A. Hagan, conceded that the book is "riddled with repetiveness[6]". John Henry Raleigh's arch comment that mere loquacity, and not eloquence, is the real gift of the Irish – "the motto of the Irish, especially the drinking Irish, is that a thing is not said until it is repeated almost ad infinitum[7]" – might be said to be apotheosized by *Angela's Ashes*.

4 But it does not end that way. A book that has specialized in logorrhea ends in a one-word chapter. How are we to understand the puzzling authorial decision to end a long-winded book with a monosyllabic final chapter?

5 Proving or disproving the accuracy of McCourt's account of the Limerick slums is not the purview of this article[8]. However, it may be pertinent to note that this enigmatic ending follows on a sequence of events that give even a sympathetic reader reason to doubt McCourt's narrative reliability. The providential details of how he gets what he terms his "escape money" (334) – and escape is not too strong a word--involving a much-too-convenient death and an attendant windfall, strain plausibility. Frank sails to New York on the *Irish Oak*. On board, a watchful priest befriends him; accompanied by the priest, on their first night in the United States as he and Tim Boyle, stumble into their sexual encounter with the brassy American women, the encounter happens with the priest sitting just outside the door: in fact he knocks on the door while Frank and "Freda" are in the midst of having sex. At that moment, Frank – speaking in the book's insistent present tense – says he does not "give a fiddler's fart if the Pope himself knocked at the door and the College of Cardinals gathered gawking at the window" (362). It is clearly a little too good to be true that the priest is waiting outside the door, and a little too obvious that the woman's name would be Freda, as in "freedom"; the episode with Freda resonates with the spurious letters columns on the men's magazine.

6 But whatever about the facts, this is how it does end, and presumably, it is how McCourt wants us to understand his arrival in America. To understand this sudden brevity, it is helpful to remember that, in Irish usage, the expression "Tis" almost always takes its meaning from the question or statement that preceded it – in this case, "Isn't this a great country altogether?"

7 As noted, Frank's attitude toward America is presumed to be highly positive. As a boy, the images that come to him through motion pictures powerfully shape his understanding of America. His film-inflected fantasy of America is largely a matter of cowboy and gangster movies, but it is also a place that represents an emotional freedom, as in the poignant comment at a rare moment of affection toward his alcoholic father, "if I were in America I could say, I love you Dad the way they do in the films but you can't do that in Limerick for fear you might be laughed at" (201).

8 One strain of commentary on *Angela's Ashes* holds that the author's motivations were both cynical and manipulative, driven by what he believed would appeal to the American

market, starting with the first words of the book, "My father and mother should have stayed in New York..."(11)[9]. The closing exchange between Frank and Tim Boyle is conspicuously near to the brogue of Stage Irishry; here and elsewhere, McCourt walks close to babuism. Not only does McCourt wheel out tired old stereotypes, his detractors say, he also panders to American self-satisfaction. In this interpretation, after three hundred pages of telling Irish Americans what they wanted to hear about Old World pig-in-the parlor Irish irresponsibility and filth, McCourt then reminds Americans how much better, and better off, they are than the Irish. Nowhere was this more scathingly asserted than in Roy Foster's 1999 review, "Tisn't: the Million-Dollar Blarney of the McCourts" in the *New Republic*. Foster charges *Angela's Ashes* with toadying to "the complex attitude of the United States to what it expects the Irish to be, and the enduring pride and reassurance that Americans find in hot water and flush lavatories[10]". At a minimum, most commentators on *Angela's Ashes* assert that the closing chapter represents an embrace of America. James B. Mitchell, for instance, writes that "McCourt argues, on the page and in person, for the achievability of the American Dream[11]". George O'Brien's fine essay "The Last Word: Reflections on *Angela's Ashes*" in *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora* (2000) speaks of McCourt "making the *concluding* and *conclusive* affirmation of Tis, referring to how great a country America is[12]".

9 Yet, when an Irish person speaks the word "Tis," the statement should by no means be understood as certain. Often, in Irish conversation, "Tis" is precisely a way of saying nothing, of merely keeping the conversation going, like a nod, "go on", or "uh-huh". It is hard to understand how George O'Brien, a native of Wexford, would call the word "conclusive": he surely has heard such an utterance used to convey a full range of meanings, at least some of which are tepid-closer to "So it seems" or "Yes, I guess so" than to any ringing affirmation. (There is, of course, an Irish classic that *does* end with a ringing affirmation: Molly Bloom's "yes I will Yes" at the end of *Ulysses*, which is, for that matter, also a book that ends with a homecoming. The affirmation of Molly's "Yes" is beyond dispute; McCourt's "Tis" is a far less enthusiastic utterance.)

10 The likelihood that the closing word is neither concluding not conclusive, but rather, a remark that leans toward the tentative is underscored by the author's deliberate hesitation. McCourt, in effect, takes a breath – and requires his readers to take a breath – before the final word. He pauses; he needs to think about the question Tim Boyle has just put.

11 Notably, the exchange occurs almost literally between two worlds, after Frank's first night in the New World. The abandon of Frank's encounter with Freda notwithstanding, recklessness – sexual or otherwise – is not the norm for newly landed immigrants. In reality, new immigrants proceed cautiously. In *Angela's Ashes*, that caution displays itself in both the moderation of the final word, and more important, in the consciously inserted pause, the space between chapters. The hesitation anticipates America's grudging embrace, if it is an embrace, of the new arrival[13]. The pause bears witness to the inescapable liminality of Irish-American identity, and immigrant identity more generally – the often superficial but occasionally profound experience of being both on the inside and on the outside in two different places. An ambiguous identity has always followed the immigrant in the New World, who is categorized by others as Irish while in America and American when back in Ireland; Frank feels this with special acuity with regard to his accent, which is mocked as foreign in both countries. His immigrant dividedness is at least doubled, in this instance, by the fact that this is a re-immigration.

12 Although more that 90 percent of the book takes place in Ireland, *Angela's Ashes* is in fact an Irish-American story, told by a United States citizen who was born in New York and had been a resident of the United States for nearly fifty years at the time of publication. Notably, it is also a book that begins and ends in America. When Tim Boyle asks Frank to assess America, it is not on his moment of arrival but on his moment of return. The narrator has been here before: he knows this "great country altogether" is where a brother died, and a place so awful for his parents that, incredibly, they preferred to return to Ireland.

13 Among the most familiar patterns of autobiography is that of introducing a point of origin, followed by a period in which the autobiographer rejects, or at least, moves away from, the point of departure before a concluding return in which the point of origin or source is seen with a new insight and maturity[14]. As it is a story of re-immigration, this pattern applies tidily to *Angela's Ashes*. Frank's last glimpse of the place that he is now being asked to endorse as "a great country" took this form:

> The ship pulled away from the dock. Mam said, That's the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island where all the immigrants came in. Then she leaned over the side and vomited and the wind from the Atlantic blew it all over us and other happy people admiring the view. Passengers cursed and ran, seagulls came from all over the harbor, and Mam hung limp and pale on the ship's rail. (46)

14 This is scarcely a memory that would prepare McCourt for a joyous return.

15 Having the final chapter comprise only a single word puts a great deal of weight on that word. It might be helpful, then, to look elsewhere in the book to how the word is used when it appears as the last word in a conversational exchange. The phrase crops up less often than might be expected, though we do encounter it from time to time embedded in sentences and phrases like "Tis a sad day for Ireland" and so on. However, there are only four instances, before the end of *Angela's Ashes*, in which the word "Tis" appears as a freestanding or nearly freestanding sentence. None occurs in an emotionally neutral context.

16 The word "Tis" first appears when the family is in the North of Ireland, and, unable to find work or charity there, they determine to relocate to the Free State where they have a better chance of getting on the dole. Looking out at Lough Neagh, the father weaves a story about how some day they will return there to swim, and to eat fried eels as Cuchulain once ate them raw "because there's great power in an eel." Frank then asks,

> Is that right, dad?
> 'Tis. (51)

17 By this point, we as readers understand that Frank is being duped; we know, but Frank does not, that when his father says "Tis" here, there is no reason to believe him; the father's fecklessness will assure that they never return to this poignant scene.

18 The next time we hear the word "Tis" is seventy pages later, again from his father, and again accompanied by a reference to the Ireland of the sagas. There, the young Frankie is preparing for his First Communion when another child tells him a "dirty story" about how Emer became Cuchulain's wife, and how the women assembled on the plains of Muirthemne and had a "pissing contest" (123). Frank is tormented by religious scruples about whether he needs to confess this and, in an admittedly maudlin passage, has a child's mystical experience when he hears the Angel on the Seventh Step say "be not afraid," and instructs him to go ahead and confess it. Notably – given the later encounter with Freda – the "angel" in question is associated with sexual innocence and/or

ignorance. The "Angel on the Seventh Step" is the McCourt family's coded version of the stork story, their chaste explanation of where babies come from. In any case, Frankie confides both his scruples and his vision to his father, who – in a rare moment of sobriety and availability – tells him not to worry:

> All right. Tell the priest if you like but the angel on the Seventh Step said that only because you didn't tell me first. Isn't it better to tell your father your troubles than an angel who is a light and a voice in your head?
> Tis, Dad. (125)

19 But, again, we know that when the trusting word "Tis" is spoken here, it is a prelude to disappointment: the father will only sporadically and unpredictably be available for his son before eventually abandoning the family.

20 The next time we encounter the word in this way, it is associated with McCourt's mother Angela, and again touches on an element of religious scruples. She and a group of women are enjoying a cigarette together; Angela complains that her husband cannot control himself, neither sexually nor with regard to drink, like other men can[15]. Angela's worries over the family's financial straits lead to sigh, "[...] I don't know under God what I'm going to do". Then

> Bridey drags on her Woodbine, drinks her tea and declares that God is good. Mam says she's sure God is good for someone somewhere but He hasn't been seen lately on the lanes of Limerick.
> Bridey laughs, Oh, Angela, you could go to hell for that, and Mam says, Aren't I there already Bridey?
> And they laugh and drink their tea and smoke their Woodbines and tell one another that the fag is the only comfort they have.
> Tis. (145-146)

21 We encounter the word "Tis" multiple times – so often that it seems as if McCourt appears to be deliberately calling attention to it – in a scene that occurs just after an incident when Frank, who has regularly skipped his Irish dance classes and gone to the movies instead, is unexpectedly called on at the home of friend Paddy Clohessy to perform a traditional dance. Unable to take part in this emblematically Irish activity, he tries to fake it with an improvised hodgepodge about "The Walls of Limerick falling down... And the River Shannon kills us". (165) At that point, Angela comes to look for young Frank, where – rather than being angry at her son for skipping classes, she is consumed with sadness when she discovers that his friend's father is in fact an old sweetheart, Dennis Clohessy. Their exchange is shot through with recognition of their present unhappiness and remorse for choices made. McCourt shamelessly milks the pathos, to the point of having the elder Clohessy ask Angela to sing the sentimental lyrics, "Oh the days of the Kerry Dancing... gone alas like our youth, too soon" (168).

22 Here, and nowhere else in the book, we encounter the word repeatedly, though not always as the last word of a conversational exchange. In the three pages given over to this regret-filled moment, the word appears seven times, as in,

> God above, is that Angela?
> Tis, Mr Clohessy.

23 And in such small exchanges as

> He says Tis me, Dennis Clohessy, Angela.
> Ah, no.
> Tis, Angela. (167)

24 Mrs Clohessy says of her invalid husband, "Tis his own fault for not going in the hospital, so tis". (168) Clohessy asks, "Is America a dry place?" and is answered, "Tis" (168). And as they walk home, Angela weeps. One of the children tries to comfort her, assuring his mother that Frankie will not run away again, at which point Angela "lifts him and hugs him and says, Oh, no , Michael, t'isn't Frankie I'm crying about. Tis Dennis Clohessy and the dancing nights at the Wembley Hall and the fish and chips after" (169).

25 McCourt, thus, prepares for the closing "Tis" of Chapter 19 by earlier calling attention to the word in scenes that are freighted with remorse, with future disappointment, and with religious scruples. All of these elements attend McCourt's reply in the closing answer.

26 The religious scruples are of particular relevance. McCourt reacts to the events upon his arrival neither with relief nor with an unmixed delight in his sudden sexual freedom. Nothing in *Angela's Ashes* suggests that he would be blasé about the peril to his soul in such an illicit encounter; he remains in all ways an Irish Catholic. His adolescence in Ireland was wracked by guilt over his sexual encounter with the tubercular Theresa – guilt that was only relieved for him by going to Confession. But here again, ambiguity characterizes McCourt's tale. *Angela's Ashes* most assuredly and deservedly attacks the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church in Ireland, and Angela bitterly denounces the priests who slammed the door in her son's face. But it is also the case that virtually the only shred of comfort he ever finds in Ireland comes from the priest to whom he unburdens himself in the Franciscan church. On his return to the New World, the priest who knocks at the door while Frank is having sex provides a powerful reminder that (except for the moment of sexual climax itself) the moral strictures and certainties of his youth have not been disabled.

27 Frank's profound uneasiness about being watched by God, by the priests, and by the continuations of the restricting social norms that governed his earlier life in Ireland lend themselves readily to Foucault's theorizing of social control by means of the Panopticon. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault proposes that the structures of modern social control in effect replicate the model prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1785; that is, the all-seeing eye that not only regulates behavior but also implicates the confined in their own scrutiny, "caught up in a power situation on which they themselves are the bearers[16]". In doing so, Panopticon provides an inverted form of comfort.

28 McCourt's coming to America was possible only because he was momentarily able to escape the Panopticon of Limerick, where "the gaze is alert everywhere"[17]. Young Frank had a secret job writing threatening letters for the usurer Mrs. Finucane. One day, he arrives at her house to find her dead of a heart attack, with her unlocked strongbox in her lap. The money pays for his passage, but Frank is not the only one released; he also seizes and destroys her ledger of money lent, thereby anonymously freeing much of Limerick from crushing debt. A little too Dickensian to be believed, but McCourt asks us to believe it.

29 But one does not leave a prison easily; an essential point of Foucault's theorizing of panoptic structures is that they become internalized. Even without the priest waiting in the ante-room – who has already warned him "These are bad women. We won't stay here long" (361) – Frank, having assumed the self-disciplining that is the goal of Panopticon – could not be unconflicted in these circumstances. And indeed they do not stay there long; the liaison with Freda is very much a "quickie," but is long enough for Frank to surrender completely to the sexual encounter. As Foucault notes, engaging in alternative sexualities

– or, perhaps, for a young man raised in the moral strictures of mid-twentieth-century Ireland, engaging in sexuality, period – is one of the ways we resist or defy the Panopticon. McCourt specifically points to this response in his remark that he would not care if the Pope himself were watching.

30 But such resistance obtains only in those moments of defiance: the containing power of the Panopticon's watchfulness remains. McCourt never asks us to believe he has broken out of the old morality; Frank leaves with the priest, flushed with embarrassment, in a tailspin of worry about what his mother would think and much else.

31 The last word of the book answers a question; Frank also enters the book by being asked a question. The opening pages of *Angela's Ashes* provide the background to his transient early childhood. Frank himself does not enter *Angela's Ashes* until page 19, when, on a Brooklyn playground his brother Malachy has some sort of an accident on a see-saw. Angela, at this point his very pregnant mother, runs over and

> She says, What did you do? What did you do to the child?
> I don't know what to say. I don't know what I did. (19)

32 In other words, when we meet Frank he is three years old and does not know what to say; when we leave him at the other end of the book, he is nineteen years old, and he is still unsure how to answer a question. And, in fact, his unarticulated but unquestionably present scruples about his encounter with the sex-crazed American woman might be phrased in similar words: What did you do? What did you do to the child – that is, to the child you were back in Ireland?

33 Questions, of course, play a central role in any memoir or fictionalized treatment of childhood; it is in asking questions that the narrators of such memoirs register their evolving consciousness and self awareness, and their entry into the generally confused and uncertain world of adulthood. The complicating factor in Frank's childhood is that his Ireland is a place seemingly bereft of adult uncertainty. In the Limerick of McCourt's youth, no male adult – and very few women – will admit to a tincture of doubt about anything. Their confident pronouncements mask an underlying cluelessness, of course. His father from the North of Ireland has no idea how to break into the networks of Limerick; the priests have no idea how to deal with the problems of the poor; the civil authorities have no idea how to manage the country (and so leave those matters to those same bumbling priests); and the school teachers are variously ignorant, obsessively rule-bound, and abusive.

34 *Angela's Ashes* abounds with instances in which adults provide unsatisfying, but authoritative, answers. Early on, Frank and Malachy are walking with their father in the countryside, leading to this exchange: "What are cows dad? Cows are cows, son." More questions from the child follow until "My father barked at him, Is there any end to your questions? Sheep are sheep, cows are cows, and that over there is a goat. A goat is a goat" (47). Later, a simple-minded neighbour known as The Abbot offers the tautology that "Apples is apples and bread is bread" (301).

35 Frank's classrooms are likewise places where questions lead only to unwarranted certainty or to abuse, never to an answer that is useful or informative. Religious instruction in particular takes the form of rote learning. For instance, Mr. Benson, the master charged with preparing Frank and his classmates to receive their First Communion, tells the class that it is his goal "to beat the idler out of us and the Sanctifying Grace into us" (118). The master goes into tirade when a boy asks what

Sanctifying Grace is, the master dismisses the very idea that a young person might display curiosity or interrogate the received answers:

> You're here to learn the catechism and to do what you're told. You're not here to be asking questions. There are too many people wandering the world and that's what has us in the state we're in and if I find any boy I this class asking questions I won't be responsible for what happens. (118)

36 When a classmate forgets himself and asks another question, the master flies into a rage. Benson thunders that if another boy asks a question, he will

> flog that boy until the blood spurts.
> What will I do boys?
> Flog the boy, sir.
> Till?
> Till the blood spurts, sir. (119)

37 In every classroom, not just those devoted to religious instruction, the pedagogy is always that of the catechism, in which the student is expected to parrot apodictic truths. In McCourt's Limerick, children are assumed to be little adults: they are expected both to know everything already and to agree with what they are told[18].

38 In this authoritarian environment adult certainty, even when it is wildly mistaken, rules over all: there are only expected answers befitting proscribed roles. In no instance, in the whole of Frank's young life – except perhaps during the illicit literary discussions he has during his hospitalizations, discussions that violate an imposed rule of silence – is Frank ever asked a question that legitimately seeks an answer. Children like Frank, having been battered into silence and submission, find no room for self-awareness to develop. As James B. Mitchell notes, "One of the conceits of *Angela's Ashes* is that the 'I' seems to have been formed externally, as if McCourt's subjectivity developed only through interacting with others, rather than developed in concert with introspective reflection[19]". In the Ireland of *Angela's Ashes*, questions get asked only for the purpose of soliciting agreement.

39 Thus, when his fellow emigrant Tim Boyle asks, "Isn't this a great country altogether?" he surely expects no ambiguity. The expected answer would be for Frank to look him in the eye and assert, "Yes, absolutely". But that is not the answer Frank gives: he responds with hesitation. Edward Hagan is correct about the meaning of McCourt's final "Tis" when he writes that it "represents a consciousness evolving from the certainty of patriarchal assertion, to the ambiguity of Frank's 'mid-atlantic' situation[20]". McCourt's last word assents to, but does not embrace, the prior question.

40 Tim Boyle may think that arrival in America was an occasion for the fireworks of a sudden sexual liberty. But that is not the only freedom conferred upon Frank McCourt. On his first night back in the New World, he has also been given the freedom to think about his answer. In the understated last word, we see that Frank's voyage has, at last, brought him to a place where he has the liberty to speak from interiority and reflection.

NOTES

1. The most vigorous of these debates has been the question of whether the book is, in fact, a memoir. See, for instance, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels "I Knew Angela, Did Frank McCourt?", in which Steinfels disputes essential facts in McCourt's presentation of his mother. The dispute over McCourt's accuracy and/or inaccuracy was especially vigorous in Limerick City; see, for instance, Warren Hoge , 'Limerick, Burned, Also Finds a Salve in 'Angela's Ashes'.

2. In this article, I will refer to narrator of the book as Frank; when the discussion centers on the author's narrative strategies and choices, I will refer to McCourt.

3. John Glassie, untitled review of *Angela's Ashes*, *Salon* [*http://www.salon1999.com/sneaks/sneakpeeks.html*]. No date given.

4. Frank Kermode, *The* Sense of an Ending*: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1967.

5. Following Joyce, McCourt never uses quotation marks when presenting dialogue; however they have occasionally been introduced in this article for purposes of clarity. Note, too, that in this statement the capital G on the word "God" is not an accident; it signals, that despite his claims to the contrary, McCourt remains steeped in Catholicism and, despite his rejection of the watchful priest's morality, at an unconscious level he is still observing its pieties.

6. Edward A. Hagan, "Really An Alley Cat?: *Angela's Ashes* and Critical Orthodoxy", *New Hibernia Review*, Volume 4, number 4 ,Winter, 2000, p. 39-52.

7. John Henry Raleigh, "O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and New England Irish-Catholicism", *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed John Gassner. Englewood Cliffs, jj, Prentice-Hall, 1964, p. 124-141.

8. For the record, the present author believes that the portrayal of Irish urban poverty in *Angela's Ashes* is generally accurate. It should be remembered that the McCourts were not merely poor; they were exceptionally poor, even in comparison to their already deprived neighbours.

9. McCourt may indeed betray a certain cynicism – though he describes it as inventive pedagogy – when in *Teacher Man* (2005), his memoir of his years as a New York secondary school teacher, he quite unabashedly admits that he related and embellished stories of his Irish childhood in order to keep his students quiet.

10. Roy Foster, "Tisn't: the Million-Dollar Blarney of the McCourts". *New Republic* , November 1, 1999, p. 29-31.

11. James B. Mitchell, "Popular Autobiography as Historiography: the Reality Effect of *Angela's Ashes*" *Biography*,Volume 26, number 4 (2003), p. 607-624.

12. George O'Brien, "The Last Word: Reflections on Angela's Ashes", *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora*. Ed. Charles Fanning. Carbondale, Southern Illinois UP , 2000, p. 236-249 (emphasis added).

13. The playing-out of the immigrant's arrival is told in McCourt's second volume of memoir, titled *'Tis: A Memoir* (1999). Although the second book almost universally disappointed readers, its generally hopeful trajectory suggests that in the sequel, the single-word does affirm without ambiguity. I propose that it might also suggest that the matter was unresolved at the close of the first book.

14. Such classic works as Augustine's *Confessions*, Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, or even Zora Neale Huston's fictionalized autobiography *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, follow this structure. The pattern is compellingly examined with reference to religious life writing in David Leigh, *Circuitous Journeys: Modern Spiritual Autobiography*.

15. Such scenes give rise to one of the most frequently voiced challenges to McCourt's narrative reliability: that he reports on conversations that he would have had no way of knowing, including conversations that took place before he was born. For a thoughtful consideration of the multiple narrative strategies at work in *Angela's Ashes*, see Shannon Forbes, "Performative Identity Formation in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*."

16. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York, Vintage Books, 1999, p. 195-228.

17. Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

18. The social marginality of children in Ireland has been widely discussed; for a thoughtful handling of the topic with respect to a contemporary novelist, see Kelly J. S. McGovern's discussion of *The Dancers Dancing* by Eilis ní Dhuihne: "*The Dancers Dancing* makes it clear that Irish adults regard children as their pawns: "Children are there to carry out adults' orders, first and foremost. Their feelings, and adults do not believe they have any, simply don't matter" (246).

19. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 612.

20. Hagan, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

ABSTRACTS

Commentators on *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* (1996) by Frank McCourt have consistently understood its enigmatic final chapter consisting of the single word "Tis", to represent an enthusiastic embrace of America. Such readings fail to recognize the ambiguous nature of the word "Tis" in Irish parlance. McCourt adumbrates the closing word in several instances earlier in the text, in which it appears in contexts laden with remorse, uncertainty, and evasion. Special attention is paid to the fact that the word answers a question: earlier in the text, questions serve only to reinforce the authoritarian, panoptical nature of Irish society. The essay argues that the closing word indicates not an embrace of America, but the timid beginnings of interiority and reflectiveness.

Les commentateurs de *Angela's Ashes : A Memoir* (1996) de Frank McCourt ont pour la plupart interprété l'énigmatique chapitre final, consistant en une seule phrase : « Tis », comme une expression des sentiments enthousiastes de l'auteur envers les Etats-Unis. Mais une telle lecture

ne prend pas en compte l'ambiguïté du mot « Tis » dans la bouche des Irlandais. McCourt annonce ce mot de la fin à plusieurs reprises dans le texte, dans lequel il apparaît dans des contextes empreints de remords, d'incertitude et d'indécision. Il convient de souligner que le mot est une réponse à une question : plus tôt dans le texte, les questions servent surtout à renforcer le caractère autoritaire, panoptique, de la société irlandaise. Cet article analyse le mot de la fin non comme une adhésion aux valeurs américaines, mais comme les débuts timides d'un travail d'introspection et de retour sur soi-même.

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